

Employers must break down obstacles for mental health benefits

More and more employers understand the importance of mental health care for their employees. However, simply recognizing it and offering mental health coverage isn't necessarily enough.

Several obstacles can prevent employees from seeking and receiving the coverage they need. Fortunately, there's a lot you can do as an employer to break down those obstacles and create a healthier workforce.

What obstacles are we likely to encounter?

To a greater or lesser degree, you'll encounter these four obstacles to the use of the mental health care support system that you have in place: (1) awareness, (2) cost, (3) time and (4) stigma.

Awareness

As an HR professional you know this: no matter how many times you explain and review your healthcare benefits, many people will not hear the answer to a question until it's their question. Communicate relentlessly, repeat, post info, put it online, accept calls and hallway stops to answer questions about your healthcare coverage. Whether asking for themselves or others, be ready to share the relevant information again and again and again. Inform and regularly remind your managers to do so as well.

Cost

Be sure to make your care as cost-friendly as possible and assess parity across your healthcare benefits. Nearly half of those who choose to skip needed mental healthcare do so because of cost or poor insurance coverage. Know that very often co-pays are an obstacle to care. Make sure you have an expansive network and to the extent possible, provide employees with options. Be aware that prescriptions for behavioral health conditions can be costly. Research has estimated that one in four individuals prescribed a medication for a behavioral health issue chooses not to take it for cost reasons. Again — think of investments in mental healthcare as cost avoidance for minimizing absenteeism, enhancing productivity as well as reducing future healthcare costs.

Time

The length of time, as well as the time of day that care is available, should not be obstacles to care. We've created an on-demand consumer society. Make sure that the services and networks with whom you contract provide care at times convenient to the employee. Additionally, provide multiple methods by which the employee can access care, and provide options in the duration of care.

Stigma

While the stigma around mental health care seems to be slowly eroding, it still exists. "Going to a shrink" can be seen as an insult or disdainful comment. Sharing such information about a person and/or disrespectful comments about using mental health care is a HIPAA violation and should be dealt with in a serious manner. It's

no different than mocking a co-worker with a physical illness or condition.

The only way to overcome this stigma is to address the topic openly and repeatedly. Consistently talk about mental health as well as support for behavioral health conditions — announcing solutions and getting others to treat it as a normal and serious subject. Revisit the topic on a regular basis and encourage senior leaders to do so as well.

Teach supervisors and managers about the basic behavioral health symptoms to look for and how to discretely discuss the care that is available to others. Also, hold them accountable and instruct them to hold others accountable for avoiding negative stereotypes when they talk about mental health issues.

With research indicating that millennials and the GenZ populations seem to be more open to mental health care topics, the informal taboo about openly discussing behavioral health conditions and their causes at work may be finally disappearing. Perhaps with time and continued effort we'll get to a point that an anxiety disorder can be discussed as openly as a cold or flu.

How can we promote mental health?

So many experts believe we're in a mental health crisis. A lot of people are in a bad spot emotionally, and we need to triage and help them out, but focusing on those individuals with immediate and acute needs should only be seen as half of our mental health efforts.

Just like the movement towards proactive wellness focused on keeping the body healthy, so too can we focus on activities to promote mental health. In fact, many wellness efforts have evolved to “wholeness” efforts that address some combination of mental, physical, spiritual, social, emotional, financial, and cognitive development. Thinking about creating an environment where each of these is addressed will create a very complete and robust health program.

Years ago, management guru Tom Peters coined the term “creative swiping” (or maybe he stole the term!). It meant borrowing successful ideas from others and applying them in your workplace. That's great advice regarding developing a workplace environment that reduces behavioral health conditions and maximizes mental health promotion. Below are just a few ideas for enhancing mental health, with the recognition these are likely to also have other related beneficial effects.

Ways to enhance employee mental health:

- Support unplugging. Have employees turn off their phones after hours and leave laptops at home when on vacation.
- Encourage using all the time off (or PTO) individuals have earned.
- Help individuals achieve the right balance of work from home and in office work.
- Provide free sessions on yoga, mindfulness, meditation.
- Teach relaxation techniques (e.g., box breathing, self-hypnosis, etc.).
- Encourage walking and running groups.
- Plan team or individual games or contests such as Words with Friends tournaments, a cornhole tournament, or poker sessions.
- Use humor when appropriate.
- Hold a talent show.
- Offer healthy free food choices, a weekly fruit cart, etc...
- Hold resilience training.
- Provide gym memberships,
- Host onsite Massage days.
- Create attractive environments using paint colors, plants, natural light, music, and more.

- Create a quiet room.

Not all organizations can do all of these things. The methods you can employ to be proactive in releasing stressors and enhancing the mental health of your workforce will vary based on your industry and workforce. That's why I endorse creative swiping and positive deviance — see what other comparable organizations are doing — and experiment. Do your research and find out what works.

Here are some additional useful sources for creative swiping:

- The American Psychological Association annually gives Psychologically Healthy Workplace Awards. Their criteria categories include work-life balance, employee involvement, employee recognition, employee growth and development, and health and safety. Review their criteria and read their winners' stories to spark good ideas for you to try.
- Look at local, state, and national Best Places to Work award criteria and winners' stories.
- Review the field of Positive Psychology. Some of the concepts and exercises they recommend may be transferable to your organization.
- A thought leader in mental health promotion at the organization level is Lyra Health. Reviewing their materials may provide valuable ideas.
- Finally, reach out to your peers, and of course, this author and my colleagues at Business Management Daily!